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AUTHOR McWhinnie, Harold James
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ABSTRACT

Rudolph Arnheim combined his knowledge of psychology with a love of art and interest in the artist. This paper describes his deep contact with the work of art in all of his endeavors and his almost single-handed establishment of a psychology of art movement in the United States. Rudolph Arnheim focussed his effort in writing and research rather than on participation in art education debates concerning research methods and course content. A review placed his major writing in the context of history and with implications for future research in art education. (CK)

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ON RUDOLPH ARNHEIM'S CONTRIBUTION TO ART EDUCATION

by

Harold James McWhinnie

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

University of Maryland

College Park, Maryland 20743

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ON ARNHEIM

ABSTRACT

This paper is written as a very general homage to Arnheim rather than a detailed analysis of all or even part of his total work. The paper was written, in part, to pay the interest on a debt long overdue. Arnheim's great strength is that he combines his knowledge of psychology with a deep love of art and interest in the artist. He remains, in all of his work, in deep contact with the work of art and he established almost singlehandedly a Psychology of Art movement in this country.

Other psychologists have been concerned with art and with the aesthetic response but their interests have become diverted away from the art works themselves by the use of tests and analysis of test data which "stand for" but are not works of art themselves. To his great credit Arnheim has stood above the more recent art education debates about DBAE and the content of art instruction in the schools.

To Arnheim's great credit, he always keeps his eye fixed upon the work of art itself in all of his writings and research efforts. He did not let himself become diverted by fashionable studies in aesthetic preference or creativity. His major writings are reviewed with an eye as to their place in history and with implications for future research in Art Education.

ON ARNHEIM

INTRODUCTION

Arnheim's major thesis is that seeing becomes an act of will. We are able as human beings to will what to see and what not to see. For him the act of seeing and perceiving in general is not a stimulus-response activity but a cognitive activity in which each one of us has the capacity to organize his own Gestalt. Nowhere is this more evident or more complex than in the perception of works of art. This is basically the Gestalt theory of aesthetic perception with the emphasis placed upon the formal nature of art and the relationship of form which are perceived as a part of the artistic encounter.

Arnheim's first and greatest contribution to the field of Art Education was his epic work "Art and Visual Perception," (Arnheim, 1954). In that text, he presented Gestalt psychology and introduced the psychology of perception for the artist and the art educator. He tried to make what was at the time new and strange material relevant for the artist by applications of that material to the creation and perception of works of art. When Arnheim wrote his book most of the graduate research programs in art education did not exist and most of our leading researchers were still in high school or undergraduate university studies.

When seen as a cognitive activity, involvement in the art experience, whether studio or historical-critical are in Eisner's terms a cognitive language (Eisner, 1990). As a cognitive activity it is also in Gardner's terms one of the seven multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1990). If Arnheim is taken along with Gardner and Eisner we seem to have three very

powerfull voices for a new view of art as cognition. We have I believe a significant paradigm shift in art education theory and a new revolution in the making in the content of what will be taught in the schools.

The work of art was central theme in many of Arnheim's writings. To understand works of art and the artist who made them with their psychological as well as aesthetic implications was the goal which he set out for himself in all of his work. In his book Visual Thinking (1969) he came to see the role of intelligence in perception and he argues that certain cognitive operations called "thinking" are not the privilege of mental processes that operate above and beyond perception itself, but the essential ingredients of perception act (Arnheim, 1969, pp. 13).

The development in his thought of the point of view that perception itself is a cognitive process is one of the major contributions of his work. In "Art and Visual Perception," Arnheim adhered more to the Gestalt point of view that the visual configurations arouse spontaneously out of the stimulus itself. The general development trend of all of his writings is the movement to the position that there is a role intelligence in perception. This development in his position is a very different point of view from that of pure Gestalt psychology from which his early work grew.

The question of empathy is a very important concept within Gestalt psychology as well as for Arnheim's conceptions of the ceative act as a purposeful act of will. In the moment of appreciation of perception of a work of are we in ourselves the spectators re-create the

creative art within ourselves. We ourselves make he discovery again and the great poem or theorem become new again to each one. The early lesson from Gestalt psychology gives one very important lesson for the art education, that a direct experience of works of art is vital to the act of asthetic perception. The actual practice of Arnheim ideas can be found in the teaching modes of the design fields as they have evolved out of the Bauhaus. George Kepes who established the basic design education point of view at both Harvard and M.I.T. has summed the Arnheim point of view when he wrote:

> Every properly functioning human being transforms the visual signals that he receives from the outside into structured, meaningful entities. Without the perceptual ordering of his sense responses into images of things in space, man cannot orient himself. Without shaping his physical environment in accordance with those images, he cannot survive. His capacity to structure his environment according to his needs - that is his ability to work out a rapport with his world - determines the quality of his life. (Kepes, 1965, pp. 1)

Arnheim believes the artistic vision, our own individual creative responses to the world, is basic and it is through the experiences of the artist, that we come to heighten our perception of the qualities of life, its joys and its sorrows. Arnheim's insistence on the value of visual perception as thought contributed towards moving the psychological understanding of the perceptual processes well beyond the mechanistic models of the 1920's. It would now seem that a strong rationale for art in the public schools as basic in the education of all children can be found in the conception of visual thought which Arnheim advanced

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Within the field of Art Education itself, June McFee has long argued this position for most of her professional life. Since McFee based her concepts of visual literacy on psychological and cultural foundations, she did not give the work of art itself the same central position as did Arnheim (McFee, 1961). In McFee's first book, Preparation For Art she advanced not only her well known perception-delineation theory for behavior in art but conceptualized the design curriculum with its emphasis upon abstract formal relationships as central to a general education in art. (In this sense both Mc Fee and Arnheim may have overstated the influence and importance of the formal properities of the work of art.) [1]

Arnheim's concept of visual thought as being basic to all education means that we should wake up to the importance of art in the schools on the one hand and on the other hand, it also means that through education in all of the arts one arrives at the level of visual literacy envisioned by both McFee and Arnheim. One of the basic premises is that education in the arts restores a balance to the curriculum and the educative process which heretofore had rewarded the cognitive faculties. The call for education of the senses echoes Arnheim's basic premise of the importance of visual thinking. At a time when the art educator is called upon to justify most aspects of his program, the Arnheim concept of the necessity for education in visual thinking as a part of general cognitive development can be well used to argue for studio experiences in art. (This argument has been made by both Eisner and Gardner at recent NAEA conferences.)

For Arnheim, the study of children's art was the basic key for an understanding of the development of artistic vision. For in the drawings of the young child one can see and

trace how images grew and symbols developed often unfettered by more sophisticated cognitive processes. For Arnheim this artistic process was the intuitive percept made into concrete form.

But Arnheim did not have a romantic view of the art of the child. In all of his thought, he moved ahead towards a deeper appreciation and understanding of adult art forms and of the work of significant artists both modern and historical. Yet at a very critical point in Arnheim's own psychological development, the art of the child gave him the key to visual perception as a conscious act of will. For Arnheim and for many contemporary artists, the process of seeing and the translation of percepts into visual statements, is a process of order and clarity. It is not random! It is not an accidental process. There is an order in the universe.

For many art educators, influenced as they were by the abstract expressionist movement of the late 1950's and early 1960's; Arnheim's work and ideas about the teaching of art through Gestalt design concepts was "too structured." The work of June McFee (1957, 1961, 1976) and Lowenfeld (1953) would probably not have been possible without the groundwork in Gestalt psychology as laid down by Arnheim. An analysis of "Art and Visual Perception," Arnheim's truly great work after a period of 25 years, reveals his strengths as a thinker. It would be inconceivable and probably impossible to teach courses in design, color, or visual communications the way they are now being taught with a strong emphasis on the behavioral and cognitive aspects of design. In his introduction, written over 25 years ago, he says:

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Art may seem to be in danger of being drowned by talk. Rarely are we presented with a new specimen of what we are willing to accept as genuine art. Yet we are overwhelmed by a flood of books, articles, dissertations, speeches, lectures, guides - ready to tell us what art is, what it is not, what was done by whom and when and why and because of whom and what. We are haunted by the vision of a small delicate body dissected by crowds of eager lay surgeons and lay analysts. And we feel tempted to assume that art is unsure in our time because we think and talk too much about it." (1954, pp.V)

If such was the situation 30 years ago with clearly an over-verbalization about art and a lessening of the actual concrete experiences with works of art, one can only imagine Arnheim's reactions to the current state of affairs in art education. We are it seems, about to drown ourselves in words.

He continues in this same introduction to ascribe this state of affairs to not comprehending the nature of things by what our senses tell us about them. To find meaning in what we see, to relate directly to the work of art was Arnheim's basic message. The above statement seems as valid a description as when it was first written. The idea of visual literacy, of being able to discover meanings in images and symbols, the concept of a visual language is still a key concept in art education. Also, in his 1954 introduction, Arnheim stated these cardinal principles which permeated most of his later writings. These were:

(1) We must be educated to discover meaning in what we see.

(2) Mere exposure to works of art is not enough.

(3) Visual things cannot be expressed in words, language and logic is no substitute for direct contact with reality.

(4) Verbal analysis will not paralyze intuitive creation.

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When first published in 1954, Arnheim's book stood in distinct contrast to the then prevailing mode of art in America, abstract-expressionism. Such statements as the following led, I believe, to the rejection of his ideas as "too structured."

> Among the various fashions that influence discussions of art these days, one particularly disturbs the artist - that the understanding of a work of art is an entirely subjective affair. We are told that what a person sees depends entirely on who he is, what he is interested in, what he has experienced in the past, and how he chooses to divert his attentions. If this were true, the artist would have to believe that what he sees in his painting or sculpture is there only because it is he who is looking at it and that another observer will see nothing of the sort. (1954, pp. 64)

While it is true that there are considerable individual differences as to how one sees and responds to perceptual phenomena, many of the Gestalt principles of design discussed by Arnheim were seen by art educators as being independent of individual differences in perception. This was a point which Arnheim never made. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, there is probably no better description of the drawings of children than in his chapter entitled, "Growth." In that discussion, his great contribution was to substitute the perceptual theory that "children draw what they see." For the earlier idea that" children draw what they know", almost every art education book written since 1954 echoes this significant step in the development of a general theory of children's art. (McFee, 1961)

Recent theorists such as the Wilsons (1983) have open the debate anew in terms of the conceptual vs. the perceptual theory of children's development in art. The dominate role

of the perceptual theory is now under attack from those who look for a new role for cognition in the perceptual art.

His basic account of the growth and development of form in children's drawing is according to Gestalt beliefs and according to the Gestalt "laws of perceptual organization." The drawing process for the child is one of organic growth. There is now some variance between Arnheim's theory of growth and development and the recent studies on influences on children's art by Wilson and Wilson (1979). Arnheim fails to account for the many models presented to the young child for the use of symbolism in their art works by the mass media. We need to remember that Arnheim's observation and the Gestalt theory upon which it was based was pre-TV and before Marshall McLuhan. In other words, the impact of TV and the recent growth and development of the news media needs to be accounted for in any study of children's art. This is the strength of the new research and new theories of the Wilsons.

In spite of other changes in his thought over the past 30 years, his basic account of the growth and development of form in children's drawing is according to Gestalt beliefs and according to the Gestalt "laws of perceptual organization" The drawing process for the child is one of organic growth.

Other aspects of Arnheim's work clearly reflect the entire range of 20th Century art. In retrospect, the Gestalt theory of space with primary emphasis placed upon figure-ground relationships, shared contours, etc. is very much a cubistic account of space in art. As Gestalt space was essentially cubistic, Gestalt accounts of light and color are romantically expressionistic. Here Arnheim turns to Kandinsky (1913) and to Goethe (1808) for a theory

of color which, of course, places the individual and the individual's unique perceptions of color at the centerpoint in the perceptual act.

Finally, Arnheim explicates the concept that the expressive qualities of a work of art are embedded in the visual structure of that work. The priority of expression, although much altered in adults by a scientifically oriented educational system, becomes striking in the works of children and primitive peoples in the priority given to the physiognomic properties. Here Arnheim reflects the earlier work of Heinz Werner (1948).

I have, in this paper, placed great emphasis on "Art and Visual Perception" because in that single work we find the basic groundwork of many of his other ideas. His analysis of motion and the perception of motion in art is reflected in his detailed later interest in and writing about the film. The cubistic account of space in this book is seen later in great detail in his analysis of Picasso. Arnheim's concept of expression in art is clearly influenced by the work of Jung. This makes a curious mixture because the mystical account of Jung becomes wedded to the basic account of visual thinking as an orderly approach in the language of art and design.

So many of the concepts, ideas, observations, both psychological and aesthetic, are so familiar to us that one cannot really imagine what our own conceptions of art were before Arnheim made his great contribution, which was to think about art in psychological terms. While he does seem to be dogmatic in his accounts of perceptual phenomon in art, Arnheim is fundamentally correct in his observations. While his examples may better fit the cubistic art styles of the 1930's and 1940's, the recent post-1960 developments in art can

still be accounted for by his theories. His system of perceptual analysis is not a closed one but it is broad enough to account for a wide range of expressive forms.

This paper, as it has evolved, has become more than an analysis. It became the realization of the debt I owed to Arnheim, both in my own considerable research on children's art preferences and my work as an artist. This paper has been an attempt not only to repay the debt but pay it with the interest due. His basic message to all of us is to remain firm and constant to the work of art and to the eye of the artist. Over-intellectualization in matters of art and aesthetic can be and often have been fatal. We all owe him a great debt for in many ways he taught us how to see.

The reviewing of Arnheim's writings in preparation for this paper has been a truly sobering experince for me. Art educators have never as a group given him his just reward. His work has never been as basic to my own thinking as it should have been. Yet within his thinking is a wealth of guidance for art education in this new decade as we move beyond the DBAE paradigm; a paradigmatic shift has already taken place and the role of the art studio will once more assume a central place in the education of the artist, in the content of art instruction in the public schools.

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REFERENCE NOTES

1. As to the question of Arnheim's adherence to aesthetic formalism, at the NAEA DETROIT CONFERENCE IN 1983, THIS WRITER PRESENTED A VIEW OF ARNHEIM WHICH IS SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT FROM THAT ASSUMED IN THIS PAPER. ARNHEIM WAS PRESENT AT THE CONFERENCE AND A SPIRITED DEBATE TOOK PLACE ON THE ISSUE OF AESTHETIC FORMALISM, AND THE ELEMENTS AND PRINCICIPLES OF DESIGN AS BEING NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS FOR AESTHETIC QUALITY.